

# Dealing with the Iraqi Populace: An Arab-American Soldier's Perspective



Sergeant Mounir Elkhamri, U.S. Army

*Editor's Note: The author recently completed an 18-month tour of duty in Iraq where he served with Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha, with a maneuver battalion, and as a personal translator and cultural advisor to the commander of Task Force Freedom (a two-star command). This variety of jobs was possible because of his fluency in Arabic and familiarity with Arab culture. He wrote this article to help units deploying to or already in Iraq. It is one Soldier's perspective on what we are doing right and what we can do better.*

**A**LTHOUGH COALITION FORCES have been in Iraq for over three years, some commanders still do not fully understand how important cultural and human factors are to the success of the counterinsurgency. Commanders need to realize that the unconventional fight primarily revolves around the Iraqis, not the insurgents, since the Iraqis are the center of gravity in this war. As long as coalition forces continue to measure their daily progress solely on the number of terrorists killed and the number of suspects in custody, real progress will be delayed. If coalition forces react only to the insurgency and fail to mobilize the Iraqi people, then the insurgency potentially will be a long one.

How can we get the Iraqis to support us in the counterinsurgency fight? The answer is very simple—improve the quality and increase the quantity of our cultural training prior to deployment, so that Soldiers and commanders will be able to understand and respond to the needs of the Iraqi people.

## Cultural Awareness

We cannot expect the troops to understand Iraqi culture simply by viewing a one- or two-hour PowerPoint® presentation. Cultural training should represent a large portion of the troops' predeployment training, especially for maneuver and civil affairs units. During this phase, the troops should learn basic Arabic words, gain some understanding of Islam, and focus on becoming familiar with the terrain, history, ethnicities, level of cooperation, and prior coalition activities in their Area of Operations (AO).

*Sergeant Mounir Elkhamri is a Middle East military analyst for the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He has native fluency in Arabic and working fluency in French and German. He is a graduate of the University of Missouri at Kansas City and is currently working on his masters in Middle East Studies.*

PHOTO: The author walks with some Iraqi kids in Tal Afar, Iraq, 15 October 2005. (DOD)

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In a perfect world, the redeploying unit would provide this information to the deploying unit so that it would be readily available to the troops and their leaders. But units preparing to redeploy rarely have the resources or the time to prepare an extensive briefing for the relieving unit, so another option would be to create an Iraq-Afghanistan Center that debriefs, collects, and prepares such information and other lessons learned from returning troops and commanders. This center could brief deploying units on cultural issues, needs of the local people, and significant events in their specific AO, as well as provide overall lessons learned from other AOs.

Cultural knowledge accrued during predeployment training will serve the troops well when they conduct dismounted patrols and raids, man checkpoints, or otherwise interact with the locals. It will allow troops, commanders, and the civil affairs staff to draw a fair picture of what to expect once they are on the ground, and it will aid planning.

## On the Ground in Iraq

Once in theater, with a solid understanding of the culture, commanders can better relate to the people. Commanders should spend time engaging local leaders and interfacing with the public to understand the community's needs and expectations; political, religious, and social relationships; and greatest concerns.

During these engagements, the commanders and their staffs need to assess the influence, qualifications, and capabilities of Iraqi Government officials and military leaders in the area. During my deployment, I witnessed several appointments of Iraqi officials as vice-governors, mayors, and chiefs of police based on family and political affiliations rather than qualifications. I met numerous commanders from both the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police who were promoted for political purposes from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel or from major to brigadier general and assigned to command battalions or brigades. Such appointments and promotions never sat well with the local Iraqis. With a greater understanding of the societal relationships in their AOs, commanders would be more likely to recognize, and could perhaps prevent, situations that would destabilize a community.

Armed with cultural knowledge, commanders will also understand that they have to pay close

attention to how they interact with mukhtars, sheiks, mayors, and other influential Iraqi leaders. A commander should take pains not to visit too often or spend too much time with any one leader; otherwise, they will be open to charges of favoritism toward certain individuals, tribes, or villages.

Such social engagements are time consuming, require a lot of patience, and may even interfere with daily operations, but they are essential to keep the channels of communication open; in fact, these engagements are key to the stability of the AO. Commanders should meet with local officials on a weekly basis to share information, discuss the area's critical issues, and determine how they can solve problems.

## Main Iraqi Concerns

As they engage with their Iraqi counterparts, commanders will learn about the community's primary concerns. These may include issues such as the need for better security or the need to eliminate corrupt government officials in the area, but, throughout Iraq, the most critical concerns are fuel, electricity, employment, and health care.

**Fuel shortages.** Because the Iraqi Government continues to struggle with fuel shortages and demand for fuel is increasing, each AO requires a fuel control plan. Commanders should use Iraqi security forces and local officials to create a fuel distribution plan for gas stations in their AOs. One very effective plan was executed in the Tigris River Valley, in an area about 40 miles south of Mosul. Squads from either the local police or the army were sent to all gas stations to establish order, ensure a fair distribution of gasoline, and, most important, to eliminate price gouging and black market fuel sales. This approach let Iraqi citizens pump their share of fuel for the same price at any gas station. It also kept them from waiting all day in line only to find out that no fuel was left because the gas station owner had sold most of it to the black market merchant.

**Electricity.** Distribution of electricity in Iraq is unreliable and unfairly apportioned. For example, in Mosul some neighborhoods had electricity flowing through their lines for over 20 hours a day, while neighborhoods on the other side of the city received only 4 to 6 hours of electricity a day. The electricity in both areas came from the same power plant, so



GEN George W. Casey Jr. and the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Bayan Jabr, visiting the governor of Ninewa, Drid Kashmoulah, 25 July 2005. Left to right: Vice Governor of Ninewa, Dr. Khasrou Goran; Casey; Jabr; the author; and Kashmoulah.

why the unbalanced distribution? The answer: either the insurgents or abusive local Iraqi Government officials controlled the distribution of electricity.

Insurgents often destroy the lines that supply electricity to certain districts because they use those districts as safe havens. No electricity means no light at night—a distinct disadvantage to coalition forces conducting night raids. Insurgents also shut down electricity to signal when coalition forces are present in an area.

The second reason for irregular distribution of electricity is that some Iraqi Government officials pressure engineers in charge of power plants to provide continuous service throughout the day to their towns or neighborhoods. They have no regard for shortages in other areas.

In either case, coalition commanders should get involved in fixing the problem. They should recommend that their Iraqi security force counterparts increase the number of patrols around power plants or even put a platoon or squad in each plant. If a local Iraqi official's selfishness is the reason for the unfair distribution, the commander should try to resolve this issue with the local official. At the same time, the commander should push the issue up through the chain of command, even though it may take months and sometimes years for the Iraqi Government to take corrective actions.

**Employment.** Because Iraqis always get their hopes up for better employment opportunities when a new unit arrives in their area, commanders should plan their civil affairs missions before they enter the theater. A large part of the planning should be based on information from the unit they are relieving; they should have a good idea which projects have priority. This will also keep the incoming civil affairs staff from assuming that every village needs new schools, new roads, water projects, and the like. The reality is that Iraqi infrastructure needs vary from one village or city to another. An effective civil affairs plan should be based on the needs of different sectors and take into account what coalition forces have already accomplished. It should also include any long-term projects previously discussed with the residents, so that both the departing and incoming civil affairs teams will be on the same page.

After one month in country, it is time to start discussing the projects list for the area with local sheiks, mayors, and mukhtars. The civil affairs officer should explain to the residents that the projects list is the result of coordination with the departing unit commander and feedback received from the local community. In this way, the civil affairs officer demonstrates that Iraqi input is important to the coalition and incorporated in the coalition



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**MG David Rodriguez, commander of Task Force Freedom, MNFI-NW, presents the 3d Iraqi Intervention Force's brigade commander with a plaque honoring those Iraqi soldiers killed or injured while serving in the 3d Brigade IIF in Mosul, Iraq. The author stands between Rodriguez and the 3d IIF Brigade's commander.**

plan. This will minimize the distrust locals have for the new civil affairs staff during the transition period. Unfortunately, departing units sometimes promise a village a project that never gets off the ground because the incoming unit decides that it is not a priority or because the leaders don't want to get involved in any civil affairs activities.

The civil affairs staff should put in place a fair and equal bidding process. This process should give priority to local contractors, but if an outsider wins the contract, he should be required to hire locals to work on the project. This approach will serve both the locals and the coalition by creating jobs in the area. It will also allow the civil affairs section to keep a close eye on the contractor by talking with the local workers. The civil affairs staff should also pay close attention to the contractor who ends up winning project bids all the time, because the Iraqis may interpret it as favoritism.

Units should track the history of past and current contractors, particularly the quality of their work. There have been incidents in which contractors started a project but never finished it and, in some cases, even took the project funds and disappeared until new units arrived in the area. Then they reappeared and bid successfully on new projects, because the new civil affairs section wasn't aware of the contractors' history.

Civil affairs should also do a better job assessing a project's cost before placing it on the list for bidding. According to Iraqi civilians, the coalition has overpaid on numerous projects.

**Health care.** Public health in Iraq is in free fall, and health care is often triage care at best. Because Iraqi health care services lack medical infrastructure, equipment, and staff, the coalition should seize the opportunity to strengthen bonds with the locals by creating a medical assistance program that satisfies Iraqis' basic medical needs. The program should consist of frequent visits by coalition medics to clinics, hospitals, and villages to conduct medical screening and provide basic health care. Such a program benefits the locals and provides training for Iraqi doctors and nurses. Coalition medical programs should not become the primary care in the region, but they can strengthen ties with the local community.

## Building Ties to the Community

During my time in Iraq, I was able to observe various American, coalition, and Iraqi units. The most effective were always the ones with close ties to the local community. The average Iraqi does not want chaos. He wants a chance to raise his children and provide a better life for them. If we show him how to do so, he will support us—not the terrorists. **MR**